

## DURHAM CITY NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING FORUM



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### **North Road Regeneration and A690 Improvements - Revised Proposals (October 2016)**

**Comments by the Durham City Neighbourhood Planning Forum**

#### **The Consultations**

The Durham City Neighbourhood Plan ('Our Neighbourhood') Working Group welcomes this opportunity to comment on the revised proposals. The County Council's consultation in 2014 met with considerable criticism which the revised proposal seeks to meet. Since then, the County Council has published a report on a Strategy for Sustainable Transport for Durham City and the Durham City Neighbourhood Plan Working Group is consulting on its own draft proposals including transport policies. Both are a major step forward in ensuring that the City develops a sustainable transport infrastructure. The new bus station and A690 improvements will need to conform to these new strategies and policies.

The County Council's earlier consultations on regenerating North Road and the bus station have resulted in strong support for regenerating North Road. However, it is not acceptable for the Council to represent this now as public support for building a new bus station. We are therefore responding by generally supporting the regeneration of North Road but questioning need and grounds for relocation of the bus station.

#### **Regeneration of North Road**

Draft planning policies for 'Our Neighbourhood' were approved at the full Forum meeting on 20th October 2016 from which the following key points arise:

- the regeneration North Road is strongly supported as a vital contribution to heritage and tourism in Durham City
- the bus station is an integral part of regenerating North Road
- public opinion favours the improvement of the existing bus station over the proposed new bus station

Our public consultations on 'What is good about Durham City, what is bad, and what needs to change?' confirmed that the regeneration of North Road is strongly supported by residents and businesses of the City. North Road as the entrance point to Durham for people arriving by train or by bus gives a first impression of a marginal shopping area dominated by charity shops. The need and potential for regeneration is considerable.

There are buildings of great architectural and historic quality and interest, and most of the others are of townscape value with the exception of the unsympathetic and outdated 1960s shopping redevelopments. Retaining and refurbishing most of the existing buildings while redeveloping the three 1960s eyesores -the frontage of the bus station, the former electricity showroom now the Golden Pearl supermarket, and the retail units opposite - is the key to a successful scheme. This would be the spur to a successful shopping area which would be helped by a more enjoyable environment arising from an extended area of pedestrianisation. Accordingly, we recommend consideration of the following:

- extending the pedestrianised area in North Road
- redeveloping the 1960s buildings
- providing for non-retail attractions to add variety to the appeal of the street.

The original Miners' Hall and adjacent building (formerly a cinema) could be adapted to be used for such non-retail attractions, for example as an arts/cultural centre, workshops or enterprise incubator spaces. Not only would this bring these important buildings into the active use and provide a stimulating shop window for local creativity, it could include an information hub for the attractions of the City and the County.

We note that the current scheme creates a sizeable space for a new retail facility in North Road by the relocation of the bus station. If indeed a large additional retail unit is feasible in this part of the City centre, then the redevelopment of the 1960s shop units opposite the existing bus station or the redevelopment of the Hopper House site could be considered.

### **A new bus station or improvement of the existing bus station**

It would appear that the most of the reworking the County Council has undertaken since the consultation in 2014 has been to seek to reduce the visual impact of the new building in views from North Road and the A690 approaches. This is not the fundamental review of the feasibility of relocating the bus station that might have been expected following the lack of support for it from the County Council's own consultations. The consultation exercise in 2011 asked specifically whether consultees favoured a new bus station on the new site, to which the reply was that while 28% did, more than 61% thought the present facilities to be adequate or better. The County Council claims that the 2014 consultation exercise shows overwhelming support for "bus station improvements". This is likely to contain a majority who support improvements to the existing one, and therefore cannot be interpreted as support for 'building a new one'.

The desirability of improving the experience of users of the bus station and others using the spaces in and around the development is widely agreed. However, the relative merits and financial feasibility of building the new bus station in relation to those of upgrading the existing bus station have never been fully compared. The reason could be that possible part financing of the project by way of selling the existing bus station site has excluded the more modest, less costly, and more popular option of improving the existing bus station.

The absolute advantage of the existing site is that it is already fully integrated into the fabric of the City, something which is desirable and fortunate in a small historic city, and something that the new proposal can never achieve. The new bus station, however well designed, will always present a vast bus manoeuvring area and the rear ends of many buses as the first view of the City. The existing bus station is also better located in offering shorter walking distance to the rest of the City centre. It would also contribute greatly to early regeneration of North Road with the removal of the existing drab façade, a new open concourse and potential for greater pedestrianisation of the street. The public's preferred option of improving the existing bus station should be fully examined and take account of the huge benefits of the existing site when compared to the current proposal.

### **Comments on the relocated bus station proposal**

There would be a stronger case for the proposal for a new bus station if it resulted in an increase in capacity for bus services and thereby a prospect of increasing the volume, frequency, convenience and reach of bus services. Because the new bus station does not appear to provide additional capacity - it is the same as the existing bus station - the case for a new bus station must depend upon other factors. It is unclear what those factors are other than the need to raise funding from the sale of the existing bus station site.

The proposals as now presented differ from the earlier version mainly in terms of the physical design and visual impact on users and residents. The impact of the new bus station has been reduced by moving the 'rotunda' away to avoid closing the views of the entrance to North Road. The fundamental problems, however, of orientation, scale and design materials have not been resolved:

- The building remains a potentially unsympathetic addition to the historic townscape. The key design relationships with North Road, the Viaduct, the Methodist church and the residential areas have not been resolved satisfactorily. It appears so far to be the case that a free-standing industrial-type building of such a scale is totally unsuited to this sensitive and limited site.
- The major increase in road surface for circulation and manoeuvring of buses - the sea of tarmac - and the loss of the mature planting on the existing roundabout cannot be softened by the modest planting proposed or indeed compensated for by the pedestrianisation of the top end of the North Road.

- The changes to the A690 and North Road achieve less for pedestrians and cyclists than should be possible. The plethora of refuges, the winding pedestrian routes, and the absence of a provision for cyclists needs to be reconsidered including a strong pedestrian access on the west side of the junction linking the residential areas including the Viaduct area to the bus station, and traffic calming through the whole area including the Station Approach.

While meeting the requirements of current bus operation has to be a key requirement, consideration should be given to the potential for an improved pattern of bus services to serve the City which integrates routes and provides interchange points. Such a consideration is important bearing in mind the shortage of operating space in both the existing and the proposed new bus station. We suggest the following matters should be addressed:

- plan for an increase in the number of routes that run through the City rather than terminating in the bus station so as to reduce the space requirement
- change the concept of a bus station to a 'travel centre' which includes a regular minibus service to the rail station and Wharton Park and an integrated circular City route.
- future proof the scheme by designing for clean technology including electric and hybrid vehicles.

## Conclusions

The case for a new bus station in a new location is unconvincing. Public consultations carried out by the County Council and by the Durham City Neighbourhood Planning Forum which showed a clear preference for regenerating and improving the existing bus station have been ignored and two years have been spent in making very modest changes to the earlier layout for a new bus station.

The fundamental objections to the orientation, scale and materials and the relationship of the building to its surroundings have not been resolved. It has proved to be impossible to satisfactorily integrate a building and its operating area of such a scale and nature into this sensitive and limited site.

The weakness of the County Council's position is that no scheme for improving the existing bus station has been developed, costed and consulted upon and therefore no conclusions can reliably be made of other courses of action. The view of the Durham City Neighbourhood Planning Forum is that an improved bus station on its existing site is likely to be less costly, less intrusive, more convenient and more popular than the current proposal.

3rd November 2016